

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE WILLIAM J. PERRY  
INTERVIEW BY TELEPHONE WITH DOUGLAS WALLER OF NEWSWEEK MAGAZINE  
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Q: First off, when you flew over the Straits on Monday, describe your feelings on what you saw and everything. You conveyed that at the press conference on Wednesday, too, and it sounded like it made quite an impression on you.

A: It did. I think the phrase I used was "It tore my heart to see those people bobbing down there in the open ocean on rafts, on steel drums lashed together." They were in a desperate situation. We have described this as dangerous--dangerous in the sense that their lives were at stake. I have no doubt that some of the people have already lost their lives going out there. They had been--most of them--three days getting to that point, just drifting. These are not power boats. And under the hot sun, no shade. Most of them were dehydrated by then.

So what we had underway there was a humanitarian operation. We were out there saving lives. The people who are doing are people who are trained in search and rescue operations.

Basically what I was doing was watching a rescue operation underway of hundreds of people, all of whom were in desperate situations.

Q: Tuesday evening, when you had the principals' meeting at the White House, my understanding is you conveyed some of your impressions there to the others--to Strobe Talbot and Sandy Burger and the other people there. Can you relate to me what you told them about what you saw? Because I think it made

quite an impression on them, too. You were the one official that had actually been down there first-hand.

A: First of all, I think I was emphasizing that these were desperate people--there's no other way of describing the situation--and that we have to understand there are very strong emotions driving the people who are getting into these boats.

Secondly, that the operation that was going on was an exceedingly difficult operation. It took real seamanship on the part of the Coast Guard and the Navy. I watched them, I saw a videotape taken the day before I was there of transferring by gangplank from a Coast Guard cutter to an Aegis cruiser. Hundreds of refugees were walking from one ship to another--going to the cruiser so the cruiser could take them down to Guantanamo. That's a very difficult operation to pull off.

The alternative to that--transferring people one at a time from boat to boat--just wasn't feasible with the thousands of people that we're dealing with. So it took real seamanship. It also took a break from the weather. We were getting decent weather down there. I told them at the meeting that any time the weather turns bad, not only is it only going to--fortunately--discourage people from coming out; but it's going to really put people's lives in even greater risk. Some of the things we're doing in the search and rescue operation we won't be able to do in the high seas.

I also then talked about the situation in Guantanamo, and told them that we had a vigorous operation underway to bring up tent cities for thousands more people, and that we could expand that more quickly and to a greater extent than people had previously imagined. That's what gave us some confidence to believe we could deal with this flood of people coming in in terms of housing them at Guantanamo.

Q: When you were at Guantanamo, as I understand it, you had some informal briefings from people on the ground there, NGO folks there.

A: Yes. Besides being briefed by the military joint task force people there I asked if I could meet with the UN, the State Department, and the relief organizations that were down there. It seemed to me that with both the Haitian and at times the Cuban camps, when you have thousands of people gathered together in these small, sparse quarters, that there's going to be a real morale problem--a danger of social unrest, to put it mildly.

So therefore, I wanted to know what we were doing to anticipate that and in introducing education programs, recreation programs, child care programs, various things. What we're doing in the way of introducing self-government in the camps. So I got a detailed description of that. Not just from the military people, but from the other people who are down there. They have a very good start on those programs, but it's a difficult task to undertake.

Q: At the press conference on Wednesday--at the end of your opening statement--you had one sentence there where it looked like you were choosing your words very, very carefully, [that is] that if Castro or the government tried to initiate a storming of the gate or of the perimeter or whatever, it would be considered an "unfriendly act" that we would respond to.

At the meeting Tuesday night, I guess two questions. Why did you want to say that that precise way? And also, was that decided at the meeting Tuesday night that you would deliver that message, too? Or did you decide that...

A: We certainly discussed that issue and the fact that we needed to take a very firm line on that issue at the meeting. I did not discuss specific language I was going to use, or discuss that I was going to say it just that way in the press conference, but that we should take a firm line on that point, yes. We did discuss that.

Q: So far all the available evidence shows that nothing is happening along the perimeter. There's no activity or suspicious activity. Is there something that you're worried about, though, that might spring up there?

A: There have been... The remark and my concern here was a matter of trying to forestall or preempt any actions that anybody might be considering. I don't know that they--I would hope that they're not--thinking or planning such activities. If they were, then this was intended to warn them against it. In this case, the forestalling is a lot easier than trying to deal with the problem if it occurs. If it does occur, I believe we can deal with it. But it's going to be costly and difficult for everybody concerned. This is the kind of a problem that's better to head off than to have to deal with it after it occurs.

Basically, we were trying to anticipate all of the things that can go wrong in running this operation. From an action by Castro's forces in trying to storm the back gate, to hurricanes, to social unrest at the camps. Any time you run a big operation like this, it's prudential to try to think of things that can go wrong. Then you try to take actions to preclude those from going on.

Q: As far as the hurricanes go, there's a storm brewing really in southern Cuba that shouldn't be in the path of the Florida Straits. The latest you've heard today, any concern about... Because there has to be an awful lot of lead time at Guantanamo if anything comes through there--to get ships in and everything. Anything that worries you now?

A: No, the storms--but not a hurricane--that would require an evacuation. I might say that the last time a hurricane caused an evacuation down there, I understand, historically, was more than 20 years ago.

Q: Right. That's what somebody mentioned. That's at least the good news here.

A: It's apparently not historically been in the path of major hurricanes.

Q: As I understand it, they're going to announce later today some of the other countries that will set up safe havens. Possibly Suriname. Somebody was mentioning Honduras maybe. And Panama. Are those nailed down? Realistically, how many refugees do you think you can place in those other countries?

A: I'm not in the business of trying to nail down those other countries. The State Department is doing that. Our job will be to, once they get formal permission from the governments involved, we'll be responsible then for putting the camps up there. They've talked with varying numbers of different countries, arranging for a few thousand to five thousand in each of the countries involved. So depending on how many countries, this could turn out to be quite a significant number.

Q: Was there any discussion Tuesday night, or even later in the week, that maybe we should open up American facilities too, just because the numbers will start to fill up fairly quickly?

A: We didn't discuss that. It didn't seem with the evidence we had at the meeting at that time that that would be necessary.

Q: The next day then you met in the Tank, I think from 1:00 to 2:00 with the Chiefs, to go over some of the nuts and bolts issues. What was being discussed there? What were you concerned about?

A: Primarily laying out the details of the Guantanamo operation. The nuts and bolts of getting the tents set up. The authorization to order the extra equipment and facilities needed to expand beyond the 10,000 we were originally planning, to a larger number. Getting the authorization, the funds and people involved to get the recreation and education programs underway there. Getting the MPs authorized to provide the extra security. All of the things that are required to make that a smooth running operation.

Q: Was there anything you conveyed directly to the President about your impressions of what you've seen down there, your concerns...

A: Well, the main point I was conveying... Two points I was conveying to the President. The desperation of the people concerned suggested that this might be a real flood of people. Secondly, therefore it was very important that we get a strong message out--a firm, unequivocal message--right away that not only was the journey dangerous, but that the goal was not going to be the United States, it was going to be Guantanamo, to try to discourage as much as possible people making this. But finally, that we were prepared to handle very large numbers of people at Guantanamo and could meet the flood as we now saw it for the foreseeable future. Those were the three main messages I brought to the President.

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Q: Was that in a meeting with him Tuesday, or... I'm wondering when you might have talked to him on that.

A: I talked to him separately, but we reviewed all of that at the meeting on Tuesday, right.

Q: So you talked to him separately on Tuesday, then?

A: Tuesday and Wednesday.

Q: Thank you very much. I appreciate you giving me a call.

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